



Report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee

North Carolina High Schools and Students with Disabilities: A Study of Educational Services and Outcomes

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North Carolina High Schools and Students with Disabilities: A Study of Educational Services and Outcomes

*Submitted to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee
and the
North Carolina State Board of Education*

Executive Summary

The Department of Public Instruction has been requested by the General Assembly to identify the various models being utilized to deliver educational and other services at the high school level to children with disabilities in North Carolina. As a part of its study, the Department considered the efficacy of the models currently being used in the State and reviewed the research for best practice models that are being implemented in other states. The Department was to report its findings and any recommended legislation or policy changes by March 1, 2008 to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee.

In an effort to comply with the General Assembly's request the Exceptional Children Division of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction utilized a study design that incorporated a review of current data on high school students with disabilities and their academic performance. The review of the data included an examination of statewide dropout and graduation data, and achievement data on high school End-of-Course Tests in the core subjects of Civics/Economics, English I, United States History, Algebra I, and Biology. These courses were selected because all students are required to take and pass all five of the courses as part of North Carolina's graduation requirements. The statewide performance of students with disabilities was compared to the statewide non-disabled student population performance.

To gain insight into how educational services were being delivered to students with disabilities, additional "least restrictive environment" placement data was examined that addressed where students with disabilities are receiving instruction in North Carolina's high schools. This data is submitted yearly to the Department of Public Instruction and to the federal government as a requirement under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004.

Monitoring reports from six on-site Focused Monitoring visits conducted by the Exceptional Children Division from February 21, 2007 through December 5, 2007 were examined. The multi-day visits focused on high school dropout and graduation rates and the provision of comprehensive transition services to students with disabilities.

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction requested assistance from the Mid-South Regional Resource Center (RRC) to review the research of “Best Practices” being used in other states to meet the needs of high school students with disabilities. The RRC pointed out that good teaching and good learning environments apply to all students, not just those with disabilities. Twelve states responded to the request: Arizona, California, Connecticut, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Oregon. The states that responded shared information on initiatives, which focus on high school redesign. In these initiatives the needs of all students were addressed by integrating special education into the high school reform efforts.

A web-based study of current research and resources was also conducted to determine what innovative practices or strategies for improving the delivery of educational services to students with disabilities were being promoted as effective practices in high schools. In addition, “best practice” research from the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities located at Clemson University and the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center, UNC-Charlotte was reviewed. Both federally funded centers have provided guidance to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction on reducing dropouts and improving post school outcomes for students with disabilities.

Findings

1. Student Performance

Less than 42% of students with disabilities scored level three or above on the 2006–2007 End of Course Tests (EOC) in core academic areas. There is a large achievement level gap on EOC Tests between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers which ranges from 24.5 percentage points on the US History EOC Test to 40.5 percentage points on the English I EOC Test (see Table 1). Current State Board of Education policy requires that local school systems count the EOC test as at least 25% of a student's grade. Many students with disabilities fail core academic courses due to poor performance on the EOC tests.

Table 1: 2006–2007 North Carolina State Level Performance Data for Select End-of-Course Multiple Choice Tests

	Algebra I % at or above Level III	Biology % at or above Level III	Civics/ Economics % at or above Level III	US History % at or above Level III	English I % at or above Level III
Non-Disabled Students	69.4% (N=125,799)	67.6% (N=86,431)	68.2% (N=96,117)	66.3% (N=82,929)	75.9% (N=100,417)
Students with Disabilities	33.2% (N=10,166)	37.6% (N=7,306)	37.4% (N=8,174)	41.8% (N=6,254)	35.4% (N=10,144)

Note: The performance data for all of the EOC tests disaggregated by student disability can be found at <http://disag.ncpublicschools.org/2007/>.

2. Service Delivery Models

According to the *September 2007 Periodic Child Count Exiting Report* for school year 2006–2007, there were 48,387 students with disabilities in North Carolina in grades 9 to 12 in 2006–2007. Of these students with disabilities 51.4% were in regular educational settings 80% or more of their school day. Another 22.4% of the students were in resource setting or spend 40–79% of the day with non-disabled peers and 21.9 % were in separate setting and spend 39% or less of their day with non-disabled peers. The remaining 4.3 % of the students were in more restrictive settings such as public separate and residential schools, private separate and residential schools, and homebound or hospitalized.

In spite of the fact that the majority of high school students with disabilities spend most of their school day in the regular education classroom with their non-disabled peers, there was significant disparity among cultural and racial groups in the percent of students in each setting as indicated by Table 2 below.

Table 2: Settings by Ethnicity for Students with Disabilities

	% of Total	Regular	Resource	Separate	Other
All SWD	100 % (48,387)	51.4% (24,883)	22.4% (10,853)	21.9% (10,587)	4.3% (1,919)
White	50.1%	58%	20.7%	17.5%	3.8%
Black	40.4%	43.5%	24%	27.7%	4.8%
Multicultural	1.8%	56.9%	21.8%	18%	3.3%
Hispanic	4.6%	50%	25%	21.7%	3.3%
Asian/Pacific	0.8%	53%	15.5%	26%	5.5%
Native American	1.6%	41.7%	36.5%	18.9%	2.9%

3. Student Outcomes

The outcomes for high school students with disabilities vary tremendously from school system to school system. For four traditional school systems all their high school students with disabilities who exited school dropped out during 2006–2007. As a result, they had no students with disabilities

graduate with a diploma or complete school with a certificate. Although most of these school systems were quite small, one had 38 high school students with disabilities drop out. However, six school systems had over 80% of the high school students with disabilities who exited receive a diploma. A total of twenty-four school systems had 75% of the students with disabilities who exited school receive a diploma, graduation certificate or certificate of achievement.

To determine what is happening to students with disabilities once they leave high school, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction contracted with the Department of Special Education and Child Development, University of North Carolina–Charlotte to conduct a comprehensive phone survey of students who exited school in the 2005–2006 school year. This survey was also required as part of the IDEA, Part B State Performance Plan and Annual Performance Report, which requires states to collect data on the “Percent of youth who had IEPs, are no longer in secondary school and who have been competitively employed, enrolled in some type of postsecondary school, or both, within one year of leaving high school (20 U.S.C. 1416(a) (3) (B)).” The survey was completed in the summer of 2007 with a final report issued December, 2007. The following summarizes the final report of the *2005–2006 North Carolina Post-School Data Follow-Up Survey*.

A total of 2103 students were included in the 2007 (2005–2006 leavers) follow-up survey. After deleting students who reported returning to middle or high school ($N=32$) the total was 2071. Of these 2071, a total of 1070 surveys were completed for an overall response rate of 51.7%.

Data were examined for potential nonresponse bias for gender, race/ethnicity, disability type, and type of exit for the total school leavers. Differences greater than 3% suggest under or over-representation in the dataset. Based on the differences, the following groups were not accurately represented: (a) black students were under-represented and white students were over-represented, (b) students with low incidence disabilities and those with specific learning disabilities were over-represented, (c) students who graduated with a diploma were over-represented and those who dropped out of school were under-represented.

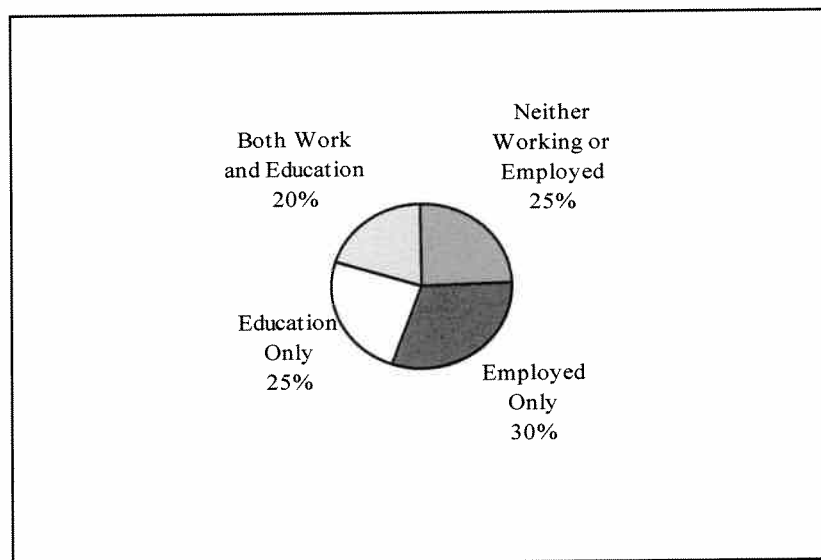
Of particular concern are the over-representation of students who graduated and the under-representation of those who dropped out. Because of this bias, it is anticipated the percent of leavers that are competitively

employed, enrolled in some type of postsecondary school, or both may be higher than expected.

The total anytime involvement in post-secondary education or employment was 75% (95% CI = 72.1% to 77.3%). This included 321 (30%) leavers who were only competitively employed, 263 (25%) leavers who only enrolled in postsecondary school, and 215 (20%) leavers who were both competitively employed and enrolled in postsecondary education at anytime since leaving school.

The low number of students with disabilities who attend post-secondary education of any kind is clearly illustrated by Figure 1. In spite of the fact that more graduates participated in the Post-School Follow-up Data Survey than dropouts, only 25% of respondents said they were attending post-secondary education of any type. Another 25% were not engaged in employment or attending post-secondary education.

Figure 1: Pie Graph of Competitively Employed and Continuing Education at Anytime Since Leaving School.



Source: *Post School Outcome Data Follow-Up Survey for 2005-2006 Leavers*
Compiled by David W. Test, Claudia Flowers, and April Mustian
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

4. High School Focused Monitoring Visits

From February 21, 2007 through December 5, 2007 the Exceptional Children Division conducted six onsite focused monitoring visits. The six

school systems monitored were selected based on the following factors: size of student population, location in the state and desire and/or need to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. All regions of the state were represented with the exception of the far west region. The visits included classroom observations, interviews with central office staff, counselors, high school teachers and administrators, and reviews of the exceptional children records and cumulative folders. Phone interviews were also conducted with students and parents of students with disabilities who exited during the 2006 and 2007 school years. The pool of students interviewed included students who graduated with or without a diploma and students who dropped out. Table 3 below outlines details of the number of schools visited, records reviewed and the demographics of who was interviewed and their positions in the local school systems.

Table 3: Onsite Focused Monitoring
Visit Demographics

	Total	School System A	School System B	School System C	School System D	School System E	School System F
# of High Schools Visited	22	1	3	2	3	8	5
# of General Ed. Teachers Interviewed	35	5	3	4	6	11	6
# of Special Ed. Teachers Interviewed	54	5	8	4	6	21	10
# of High School Administrators Interviewed	24	1	4	3	2	10	4
# of Central Office Staff Interviewed	38	6	8	3	6	10	5
# of Support Staff/Counselors Interviewed	42	6	8	6	5	10	7
# of Records Reviewed of Exited Students	291	12	90	15	27	96	51

After each focused monitoring visit an exit interview was held with school system leadership to discuss the team's findings based on data review, classroom visitations and staff interviews. Every effort was made to focus on findings that have an impact on students with disabilities by improving access to the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, decreasing dropout rates, increasing graduation rates and improving the provision of comprehensive transition services to students with disabilities. Listed below are findings that were common to two or more of the school systems visited.

- Students with disabilities are entering high school with very weak academic skills having failed to score proficient on the Eighth Grade End-of-Grade Test in Reading. Few high schools have comprehensive adolescent literacy programs.
- Dropout data indicated that for many students with disabilities a full continuum of special education services was not available or not utilized at the high school level. Review of the student records, including transcripts and IEPs, indicated that the full continuum of special education services was not always considered by IEP teams, even after evidence (failing grades or not passing the EOC exam) that students were not experiencing success in content courses.
- Review of student records indicated that placement decisions for high school students appear to be based more on the students' course of study and not individual student needs.
- Record reviews showed that students with disabilities who dropped out of school had repeatedly not made progress in the general curriculum as indicated by the large numbers of students having grade point averages of less than 1.9, having earned six or less credits at the time of dropping out, and having not passed Algebra I and/or English I.
- More students with disabilities drop out in the 9th and 10th grade than at any other grade levels. Large numbers of students fail to return to school in the fall after completing 9th grade.
- Students with disabilities tend to be older than their peers when they enter high school due to being retained one or more times in elementary

and middle schools. National research has shown that retention places students at greater risk of not graduating from high school.

- Interviews with high school staff regarding levels of special education service and continuum indicated that they believe:
 - When students' continuums change to a less restrictive environment in high school, many of those students with disabilities have a difficult time transitioning, and don't experience success in their classes.
 - Some students are not successful with the continuum of special education services commonly offered in high school (inclusion, curriculum assistance or a consultative model of service delivery).
 - For students with disabilities who require more intensive special education services to be successful, having only one period of special education per day, regardless of their special education needs, is not enough instructional support.
 - Rigorous state and local graduation requirements are very difficult for students with disabilities to meet if they come to high school without basic skills in reading and mathematics.
 - The more academically rigorous nature of current career/technical education classes has made it more difficult for students with learning problems to achieve success in them. Traditionally students with disabilities have been more successful in hands-on career/technical education classes that do not require extensive reading or written coursework.
- Transition components of students' IEPs did not always contain measurable post-school outcomes goals based on age appropriate assessments related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills; and the transition services (including courses of study) needed to assist the child in reaching those goals.
- Documentation of adult service agency involvement was missing from most IEPs or "not applicable" was written on the IEP. It appears from interviews with teachers and counselors that there is far more interagency collaboration occurring than is being documented on individual student transition components. Seventy-nine percent (91 of the 115) school systems in the state have cooperative agreements with Vocational Rehabilitation (VR). The agreements generally fund one or more VR school counselors to assist students with disabilities transitioning to post-secondary education or the

world of work. Students in school systems that do not have cooperative programs receive VR services from counselors who also serve a general or adult caseload.

- Students with disabilities missing ten or more days for one or more consecutive years are more likely to fail core academic classes and drop out of school. Most school systems have mandatory attendance policies that prevent students from earning course credits if their absences exceed a designated number of school days.
- Record reviews indicate that the IEPs of many students had no documentation of a Career Development Plus Plan's (CDP+) existence or coordination with career/technical education staff to ensure that all relevant assessment data are made available or used when developing transition components of the IEP. CDPs outline the accommodations or supplemental services special population students need to be successful in career/technical education classes as required by federal law (Carl Perkins IV).

Research Review

High School Reform

In reviewing the research for “best practices” for providing educational services for high school students with disabilities, the majority of findings were imbedded in a broad focus on high school reform. Rarely do studies or state initiatives separate specific findings for the subgroup of students with disabilities. As the Director of the Ohio High School Program Model stated, “Although there is no specific design to address students with disabilities, the models themselves are expected to address all student learning needs.” The following is a brief description of several high school reform efforts.

1. *High Schools That Work*

In 1987, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) began the *High Schools That Work* initiative. This model included key practices that were created by state leaders who ask SREB to “help high schools integrate academic and vocational studies and thereby raise the achievement of many underserved students.” The *High Schools That Work* 10 key practices include:

- High expectations
- Vocational studies
- Academic studies
- Program of study
- Work-based learning
- Teachers working together
- Students actively engaged
- Guidance
- Extra help
- Keeping score (collect and analyze data)

2. *Breaking Ranks*

In 1996, the National Association of Secondary School Principals published *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*. This document presented a vision for 21st century high schools. In 2004 *Breaking Ranks II* provided high schools with the guidance and structure to engage in the process of change to ensure the success of all students.

Experiences from *Breaking Ranks* schools have resulted in “Seven Cornerstone Strategies” identified as the foundation for improving the performance of all students. These foundational strategies include:

- Core Knowledge
- Connections with Students
- Personalized Planning
- Adapting to Differences
- Flexible Use of Time
- Distributed Leadership
- Continuous Professional Development

3. *High School Reform: Integration of Special Education*

This policy analysis, conducted by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), was based on interviews with state and local education representatives. Personnel from three states (Iowa, Michigan and Nevada) discussed their strategies for including special education in high school reform.

All three state education agencies (SEA) reported that “special education” was included from the beginning of their statewide initiatives to reform high schools. The focus of the reform efforts was to ensure that all students achieve academically and are prepared for post-secondary life. Several strategies for including special education in high school reform efforts were identified.

- Integrated professional development Activities (requiring both special education and general education participation)
- Integrated taskforces and workgroups
- Instructional practices that support special education students (collaborative teaching, consultative instructional model, differentiated instruction)
- Clear expectations (SEA clearly communicates that LEAs are responsible for ensuring that students with disabilities are included in reform efforts.)
- Data collection and assessment measures_(targeted data collection and analysis)

Several barriers to incorporating special education within state and local high school reform efforts were identified. They included:

- securing staff buy-in to accept responsibility for all students’ academic outcomes;

- low expectations for students with disabilities;
- over emphasis on secondary transition goals which could lead to neglect of basic academic skills; and
- lack of money and staff dedicated to high school reform.

4. Dropout Prevention and Students with Disabilities: Evidenced-Based Practices that Work

Research compiled by The National Center for Dropout Prevention for Students with Disabilities located at Clemson University has found several variables that have a direct impact on the dropout rate of students with disabilities. The following research findings are from a conference presentation by Matthew Klare, Ph.D. entitled “*Dropout Prevention for Students with Disabilities: Evidence-Based Programs that Work.*”

School Variables:

The following school-level alterable variables associated with school completion for students with disabilities must be addressed:

- Providing direct, individualized tutoring and support to complete homework assignments
- Support to attend class, and stay focused on school
- Participation in vocational education classes
- Participation in community-based work experience programs and training for competitive employment (Wagner, Blackorby & Hebler, 1993).

What Works:

- Interventions that focus on student engagement
- Interventions that occur over time, usually months or years
- Interventions that involve a family or parent component
- Interventions that are strength based and involve a variety of contexts (E.g., focus on protective factors such as student resiliency and self-determination both at school and at home).

Resource: PowerPoint Presentation, Matthew Klare, Ph.D.

National Dropout Prevention Center– Clemson University

National Resources

In general high school reform efforts have not explicitly addressed separate issues related to special education. However, at least four national centers have been developed that include special education specifically in their reform efforts.

1. *The International Center for Leadership in Education* houses a Special Education Institute that provides assistance to improve practices and policies for serving students with disabilities. *Strategies for High School Students with Disabilities in the General Education Curriculum*, published in 2007, is designed to assist high schools in improving the performance of students with disabilities. Based on a foundation of high expectations for all students, the two primary strategies that successful high schools are using to improve results for struggling students are:

- Co-teaching – This model includes a variety of approaches and must be “put into operation thoughtfully and with adequate staff development.”
- General education intervention system – This is frequently referred to as the Response to Intervention (RTI) model.

2. *The National High School Center* provides resources and expertise on high school improvement issues to support implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This Center released a guidance document on dropout prevention for students with disabilities. They recommended that states provide “a consistent method for tracking dropout data for all students.” The Center further believes that schools need the tools to monitor student data and use it to prevent students from dropping out of high school.

3. *The National Community of Practice in Support of Transition* is sponsored by the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) Partnership at NASDSE and works to improve interagency transition initiatives for high school students with disabilities and secondary reform issues.

4. *The Center on Instruction* provides a cutting edge collection of scientifically based research and information on K–12 instruction. They specifically address special education as one of their five strands. The Center offers materials and resources to build educators’ knowledge on instruction for students with disabilities, including guidance on the application of scientifically based research and, specifically, Response to Intervention.

Recommendations

1. Local school systems should make available teacher stipends, release time and other support for substantial and sustained professional development on meeting the needs of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. The **on-going professional development** should focus on the use of multiple approaches to instruction, materials, and methods of assessment based on the **Principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**. UDL promotes learning for all students in a classroom, not just students with disabilities.
2. The State Education Agency (SEA) and Local Education Agency (LEA) should provide all high schools the structure, professional development and on-going support to assist all high schools in establishing a general education tiered model of research-based interventions. This structure, referred to as **Responsiveness to Instruction (RTI)** in NC, provides quality interventions for students at risk to increase their success in the general education environment.
3. All high schools should develop and provide a continuum of literacy **instruction** for all students. Professional development and on-going support are critical to the success of this instruction.
4. Expand the **Positive Behavior Support (PBS)** Initiative to include all high schools in the state. PBS is a school-wide systemic approach that establishes and reinforces clear behavioral expectations for all students. At least one high school currently involved in the initiative reported a 39% drop in the number of student suspension days between the 05-06 and the 06-07 school years.
5. The SEA and LEA should provide adequate professional development and on-going support for statewide implementation of **co-teaching**. The 5 models of co-teaching (Lead and Support, Station Teaching, Parallel Teaching, Alternative Teaching, Team Teaching) promote the improved performance of students with disabilities in core academic subjects.

6. Principals must assure that a **full continuum of special education services** is made available at their high schools to meet the individualized needs of students with disabilities, as required by the IDEA 2004.
7. School Improvement Plans should include evidenced-based programs that specifically address **dropout prevention** for students with disabilities.
8. All high schools should establish **mentoring programs** for students with disabilities that promote self-determination and encourage students to enroll in post-secondary education or training.

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